



Transgender Issues in Indian Society from the Viewpoint of Arundhati Roy's Novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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ABSTRACT

The transgender community existed from way back in history. There are records for their existence thousands of years ago. But they were always submerged by the society. A chance was never provided for them, which was all that was needed to prove themselves and their existence. The tortures made them escalate downwards in fear of the outer world. The hijras, with their undefined sense of self that forms their understanding of existence, their susceptibility, marginalisation and relocation, existing in the middle of a culture that does not comprehend them and barely tolerates them, are a fitting example of the existential component of precarity. This article attempted to highlight the reason behind the issues faced by transgender community in Indian society. In order to examine these issues this article analysed the character of Anjum, a transgender, in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

KEYWORDS

Transgender, oppression, Hijra (Eunuch), Gender, Marginalization

1. INTRODUCTION

We exist in a culture, in a society, and in a historic moment of precarious mind. Precarity is declined in existential restlessness since the industrial age. In the context of literature and theory, the 'precarious' concept is used to describe the core structure of human existence: in reality, it relates to the impermanence, physicality, temporality and transience of all objects. English economist Guy Standing (2014) in his *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens* talked regarding new denizens who no longer dwell in fields or woods but live in a mysterious location that is not theirs (Standing, 2014). They are immigrants only granted such privileges in their adopted nation or culture. We therefore have several precarious social classes, which are fundamentally distinct from the others. Especially in the region, where strangers reside next to remaining strangers, they are doomed to chronic and irreducible precarity (Bauman, 2013).

Arundhati Roy is an Indian author and social activist widely recognised for her contribution to environmental justice and the human rights of the weakest. Being so attentive to the affairs of those who, for one cause or another, are ostracised, excluded, pushed into the outskirts of society, she could not remain insensitive to the precarious condition of the members of the third sex (Suleman & Mohamed, 2019; Suleman, Mohamed & Ahmmed, 2020). The definition of Indian three genders is entirely different from that of Western, binary one. It acknowledges three genders or three gender variants: male, female and neuter, hijra, which reflects the third gender. The third gender, which has been inherently inscribed in the Indian landscape for decades, is still generally marginalised in caste-based social systems. Persons of a third gender are regarded by the Homophobic culture as imperfect, non-full human beings.

Arundhati Roy hails from India. She is a writer and a journalist. She wrote her first novel *The God of Small Things* between 1992 and 1996. Published one year later, this début fictional work took the literary world by storm and catapulted Roy to worldwide critical and popular acclaim. The novel won the 1997 Booker Prize and stormed the shelves of every bookstore in the markets of the world. It is reported that more than six million copies were sold since its publication and the novel has been translated into scores of international languages. Hailed as the voice of the peripheral in the caste-ridden society of India, the novel established Roy's linguistic originality and innovative use of English idiom. For her second novel, Roy let her readers wait for 20 years. Meanwhile instead of basking in the sudden found fame, she used her idolized status to highlight social and

political injustices world over. She wrote extensively on national and global politics, human rights as well as environmental abuse in her number of non-fiction books and newspapers, until 2 decades later she finally completed her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, and published in June 2017.

1.1. Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*: Brief Summary

Arundhati Roy, the Booker prize winning author of *The God of Small Things* (1997), wrote *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), her second fiction, twenty years after her debut with the former. The novel weaves together stories of people navigating some of the darkest episodes of Modern Indian history, from land reform that dispossessed poor farmers to the 2002 Godhra train burning and Kashmir insurgency. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is at once an aching story and a decisive demonstration. One follows Anjum, a trans-woman, struggling to make a life for herself in Delhi. The world she conjures is often brutal. Psychoanalysis, the Freudian theory is dealt in this novel. The story begins and ends in the graveyard. It possesses the strong voice of the LGBT community in Modern India.

The long-awaited second novel of Arundhati Roy was published as anticipated in the middle of fictional enthusiasm. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* had been loved and disgusted, praised and criticised with vigour and graphics. *The Ministry of Utmost happiness* seemed to be broadly agreed by reviewers and critics as “a riotous carnival” (Aitkenhead, 2017), “a hulking, sprawling story” (Sehgal, 2017), “large and labyrinthine” with “a shaggy structure and polemical bent”. Whether these traits were regarded as strengths or defects lies in the difference between reader responses. As the guide for the stories, Roy gets criticized when people are disturbed by the widespread plotting, cast, temporal and geographical expansion of the *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (Mendes & Lau, 2019). Akbar (2017) finds it as “diffuse, unfocused & everything and anything at once”. In an interview, however, Roy explained that the supposed impartiality of the novel is a storytelling device meant to empower the allegedly precise construction and form that the novel is anticipated to adapt to:

Fundamentally, I think what I mean is that there is a danger of fiction becoming domesticated, you know, of too much of a product that must be quickly described, catalogued, put on a particular shelf, and everybody has to know

what the theme is. And, to me, I wanted to blow that open (Goodman & Shaikh, 2017).

The opening lines of the Ministry of Utmost Happiness showed how Roy was genuinely worried with sentiments and impact materials of the heart in her portrayals of bigotry, violence, and disgraceful lack of regard for humanity. She relentlessly depicted “joy in the saddest places” (Aitkenhead, 2017). Roy framed romantic love among her characters as poignant in both her novels, placing them in the midst of what might be harassed and strictly prohibited. She casts honestly in and of love as snatched happiness in the otherwise dreadful scenery of injustice, waste and sorrow, brief and transitory times of translucent beauty (Mendes & Lau 2019). Roy's love stories in both Velutha and Ammu in *The God of Small Things* and Tilottama and Musa in *The Ministry of Ultimate Happiness* are undoubtedly like those in which lovers found themselves in vulnerable social and political circumstances and were likely to perish. In reality, both heroes unfortunately died young, a cost to their loves, but also a blow to their purposes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Zainab, Jadoon and Saeed (2018) discussed that negotiating gender and identity is very significant in the contemporary era of technical and scientific development. Medical science helps transgendered individuals to physically and psychologically fit into the mainstream of the heterosexual society by means of hormone therapy and sex reassignment surgery. These researchers emphasized on the matter that we as a society do not take into account the possibility of assimilating the subgroups like the transgender as they are without altering their existing sexual characteristic traits. Researchers discussed the novel in her paper in detail and did review in best possible way. In the end she concluded that the lives and thoughts of the two women (Anjum and Tilottama) emphasize the need to consider the additional sexes like the Hijra's or the transgender in their own right. Both the characters attempt to cope up with a society which is at odds with them (Zainab, Jadoon & Saeed, 2018).

Batra (2017) reconfigured the technique followed in the novel and gave it a reality check that demonstrated the strength of conviction of the author even as the story posed more questions than it addresses. In his first part of the paper Batra (2017) discussed the storyline of the novel. He reviewed the novel deeply and summarized the novel. In second par he discussed the narrative style of the novel where he mentioned that:

It is not one novel, rather it is a mix of two novels; one dealing with the hijra community and the depressed class, and the second with the issue of terrorism in Kashmir. Even the third short narrative focusing on a woman Naxalite is sought to be linked loosely towards the end (p. 431).

He later also discussed the history-fiction aspects of the novel where he explored that the novel warrants feedback both on its theme and on its style of narration. Keeping style herein, it should be noted that Roy had used fictitious form to comment on modern history interwoven with politics.

Menozi (2018) mentioned in his research that Arundhati Roy, as a defining ontological dimension, put the discrepancy between fiction and reality at the heart of every protagonist in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. One of the purposes and objective of the plot addressed the tale of Anjum, a Hijra (Eunuch) or a transgendered male, residing in the Shahjahanabad neighbourhood of Old Delhi. Called Aftab at birth and confused for a boy by everyone except her parents, Anjum was in fact a transgender woman and does not fall into the social norms of her culture. At an early age, she was fascinated by a Hijra named "Bombay Silk," who stayed not too far from her house. Anjum chose to follow "Bombay Silk" and to become Hijra herself, moving to the town where the local Hijras worked and lived (Menozi, 2018).

Pinto (2017) an Indian writer, poet and translator reviews *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* as an important yet defective work. His first objection is to the novel over stretched canvas packed with all of Indianness; the fading glory of Urdu and Sanskrit, the hijra and the Kashmir freedom fighter community, the political and racial riots in Bhopal and Gujrat, the Anna Hazare movement, and the rise of Hindu extremism in Ayodhya and Godhra. He calls this thickly populated book a kaleidoscope, constantly shifting shapes and patterns with story moving backwards, and time is like a free fall. Pinto also criticizes ironical tone of Roy that she maintains right from the title of the novel till the coda. He opines that Roy recreates "Orwellian horrors" with ironic hipsterism.

Aparna (2018) stressed that Hijras were not in harmony with the society's prejudices. Therefore, in society they are not having equal rights as they did not match in this gendered society. They live in a male body, with female emotions incarcerated. In this cliché society, they always faced issues of identity crisis, based on the normative relationship between men and women. They locate no room for themselves, and their families are abandoned too. In society, they lack social, economic

and political equality. They still existed in the stereotype, pinning their existence and their own place in this gendered society.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article used the qualitative methodology in analysing the selected novel. The sample taken for this study is Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). The qualitative research methodology helped the researcher to read and understand literary texts, read and read several times in the process of analysing data. It also assisted in studying the literary texts through different perspectives of characters. Creswell (2011) talks about qualitative research and how a researcher explores the variables. He mentions:

Qualitative research is best suited to address a research problem in which you do not know the variables and need to explore. The literature might yield little information about the phenomenon of study, and you need to learn more from participants through exploration. For example, the literature may not adequately address the use of sign language in distance education courses (p. 16).

4. DISCUSSION

Hijras (transgendered) are isolated from the society, deprived of their basic rights and forced to lead a life without self-respect even in post globalised position. They are subjugated by male, female and even by hijras within the society. The word *hijra* is derived from the Persian word *hiz* which means ineffective and incompetent. The alternative words for *hijra* are *hijada*, *hijara*, *hijrah*, and it is pronounced as “*heejra*” or “*heejda*”. The word *hijra* refers to ‘eunuchs’ or ‘third gender’ in India and some South Asian countries. Though they have combined gender identities, they adopted feminine gender roles and adorned themselves with feminine attires. The famous feminist of Indian writing in English Das (1982) in the poem “The Dance of the Eunuchs” portrayed the objectification of the eunuchs who adopted women identity and thus they were defined by the normative rules. Das (1982) mentioned that, “It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came to dance, wide skirts going round and round They danced and They danced, oh, they danced till they bled” (p. 7).

The reader gets to know that when Anjum's mother discovered that Anjum was a Hijra (Eunuch), she kept that as a secret and named her Aftab -a male's name. She was in panic as “Everything

was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby.” (Roy, 2017, p. 8). The lack of dichotomous gender distinctions affects her mother, and in that way, she starts the process of Othering her own daughter. We can say that in her family Anjum/Aftab is The Other because of having this “in-between” characteristic. In addition, when her father acknowledged the secret, “he embarked on the cultural project of inculcating manliness in Aftab.” (p. 17) Her family tried to suppress her female identity, and in this sense, they try to colonize her body and her sexuality. Assumi (2018) observed that, “The in-between identity of Anjum and her patched together body depicts the cultural conflict of the colonized countries after colonization.” (p. 56).

Gender is a cultural construct as Michel Foucault argued that “sexuality is not a natural feature or fact of human life but a constructed category of experience which has historical, social and cultural, rather than biological, origins” (Spargo, 1999, p. 12). A person’s identity is defined by his body and sexual identity is a society which is a repressive and negative force. Therefore, power relation occurs, and it is centralized by a group of people and it includes the hierarchical divisions based on social, political, and economic practices and institutions. Roy portrayed the polarization of gender and race regarding the identity of hijras who are treated as inferior, untouchable and marginalized in Indian society. Woodward (2003) wrote, “The world was ordered by gender divisions with gender giving meaning to social divisions” (p. 109). Gender is related with the social divisions of class, race, disability, and sexuality. Hijra community is divided and segregated in society for the differences of sexuality. They are treated and discriminated as third gender in India and the recent word for hijra is transgender to the people of the world.

Roy’s work could be seen as an integral part of the existing growing importance in the Hijra community in India, but also as a response to the portrayal of Hijra as a topic of inquiry and discipline (Reddy, 2006). In reality, after witnessing tragic experiences during a journey to Gujarat, Anjum declined fame and recognition when a companion of hers, trapped in the bloodshed of the anti-Muslim riots of 2002, was assassinated by a mob (Engineer, 2002). Shattered and tormented by the experiences of the horrific acts, Anjum deserted her productive life as a member of the Hijra community and fled back to the cemetery, where she settled in the hut and began a new business, “Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services”, along with a blind Imam and a Dalit ex-security guard who adopts the nickname “Saddam Hussain”. Anjum 's story uncovered a core component of the novel: while Anjum was a fictional character who remained apart from the real world –or what Hijras called "Duniya" –her life was profoundly embroiled in actual, modern historical facts.

Mulaqat Ali, his father, was actively attempting to make the child become "normal," but he realised that his child was unwilling to fit into one sex. Anjum a Hijra (Eunuch) was ridiculed by other children and pointed to her ambiguity as both male and female, "a he and a she" (Roy, 2017, p. 12). Anjum considered herself mentally and internally disturbed, while some wanted her to step into the traditional system. Anjum had a body that crossed the usual boundaries between male and female. The tale of Anjum highlighted the challenges of life in a culture characterised by an idealist explanation of gender. The understanding of self in children started with the sex-related categorization of self as male or female. It was also observed that some forms of activity were linked to a single sex and were considered to be stable. Such a gender-based differentiation reinforces sexual inequalities according to feminist theorists.

Anjum, a woman stuck in a male body, accepted the role of a woman and wished to know her true self. In Butler's (1990) view, we may not need to consider gender to be passively defined, but "it is a process of constructing ourselves" (p. 31). Body is considered a locus of dialectical process and in this process, what has been imprinted on the flesh gets a new set of historical interpretation. The transformation of Aftab into Anjum was represented as a passage into another universe. She stayed with other women, a heterogeneous hermaphrodite group, including men who did not believe in surgery, Hindus and Muslims. The dilemma of the normal world, Duniya, and Hijra's environment, was portrayed in a subtle way. Anjum discovered that the Hijra were a chosen community of citizens who were blessed with the ability to curse and bless. But the tragedy was that the very very selected individuals bestowed this influence were relegated to a peripheral life. Initially, for Aftab, the transition into Anjum was a form of self-transcendence. Anjum also commented on the miserable state of Hijras, and Khwabgah was the home of citizens like her. It was a position that freed their spirits from their bodies.

India is a multiracial and multicultural country where the concepts of gender, class and caste create a sense of discrimination among different categories of people. The gender identity impacts on hijras' lives; they do not get gender recognition, employment, proper housing, and health-care services properly. They face discrimination and inequality so harsh that they feel that they are inferior. In *Neither Man Nor Woman*, Nanda (1999) states, "although cross-gender behavior in childhood is a prominent theme in hijra narratives, this behavior is not necessarily connected to a clear feminine gender identity" (p. 115). Hijras are in-between gender, and they face cross-gender situation. They are controversial community in Indian society and their existence disrupts essential

ideas about sex or gender. Holmes (2004) writes, “recognition of third sexes and third genders is not equal to valuing the presence of those who were neither male nor female”. Though hijras as third genders adopt feminine identity and they are not like ordinary Indian women. Society cannot accept them as female; rather, people have negative attitudes towards them.

In the novel, *The Khwabgah (House of Dreams)* was Anjum’s place of liberation and self-expression, “Once she became a permanent resident of the Khwabgah, Anjum was finally able to dress in the clothes she longed to wear...” (p. 25). Outside, in the Duniya (World), her double voice “frightened other people” (p. 28) and even members of the Government “...like everyone else, they feared being cursed by a Hijra.” (p. 67). People alienated her because of something superficial, or lack of information, or myths, and Anjum had to fight against gender hierarchies, accepted gendered norms and, in that way, be part of the anti-colonial resistance. She sets her emotional instincts free and remained in the Khwabgah for thirty years. One day, she found a baby girl who was abandoned or lost. Anjum took her to Khwabgah and named her Zainab. After some time, she encountered a massacre in Gujrat that was the outcome of Godhra train attack. She got a traumatic shock from that incident and decided to leave Khwabgah. She took refuge in a local cemetery and transformed it into a guest house and named it ‘Jannat Guest House’. She also started funeral services for poor, isolated and subjugated people of the society.

Anjum's friend Kulsoom Bi, who was also a Hijra (Eunuch) in Khwabgah, narrated the past of Khwabgah and Hijras and underscored the important role played by the Hijra culture in the great Hindu mythology and the Royal Palace. They coveted a place and were admired and loved for their contribution to society. Kulsoom remarked “To be present in history, even as nothing more than a chuckle, was a universe away from being written out of it altogether” (p. 51). They had a history of being inside the community as an integral part of it and at the same time outside it.

Kwabgah provided shelter and hope to many people like Anjum whom the rational world had ostracized. Anjum sought to escape from the borderland of the gender conflict within the self. It was not only Anjum, all the characters in the novel had a border within the self and in the external world. She satisfied her urge as a half-woman when she took up the role of a mother figure by raising Zainab, an abandoned kid from the street. Zainab grew with lots of mothers like Anjum in an unorthodox way. Anjum through her transformations - from a boy, to neither being boy or girl physiologically, to a woman psychologically – tried to redefine her life. The duality of being

neither a man nor a woman or being both a man and woman led Anjum into different territories of the world. Khwabgah was one such place where the Hijra's hoped to liberate their "Holy Soul" trapped in their wrong bodies. Khwabgah was unlike the ordinary world and it was defined as "another world". Anjum referred to this world as Duniya, a world which for her was oblivious of the predicament of the Hijra's. Khwabgah was a world in itself, it was considered to be abode of "special people", or "blessed people" who "came with their dreams that could not be realized in the Duniya" (p. 53).

Roy gave voice to a socially outcasted community through Anjum/Aftab's narrative and described their mental anguish with deep psychological insights. Anjum was told by Nimo Gorakhpuri, another hijra with whom she became intimate that they were created by God as an experiment. God wanted to create a living being incapable of happiness and therefore He created Hijras. "The beating husbands and cheating wives are all in us. The riot is inside us. The war is inside us... it will never settle down. It can't" (p. 23).

Roy showed that India is not a utopia for hijras, rather they are always abandoned from all social rituals. India has a long-established tradition of caste which specifies boundaries of purity and pollution between communities. Society is homophobic and hijras are not treated as human beings; they attempt to be connected with the society participating in different social celebrations as wedding, birth, and house-warming ceremonies. Roy mentioned that:

they descended on ordinary people's celebrations – weddings, births, house-warming ceremonies – dancing, singing in their wild, grating voices, offering their blessings and threatening to embarrass the hosts . . . and ruin the occasion with curses and a display of unthinkable obscenity unless they are paid a fee (p. 24).

Hijras dance, sing in their grating voices and offer blessings, threat to embarrass the hosts and sometimes ruin the occasion with curse and obscenity. Anjum had the talent of singing and reciting the Quran like common children. Roy portrayed social prejudice about *hijraas* the students of music class teased Anjum by saying that, "*He's a She. He's not a He or a She. He's a He and a She. She-He, He-She Hee! Hee! Hee!*" (p. 12). Society created confusion within Anjum about her gender identity and she stopped going to music class to avoid abuse, ridicule and prurient curiosity of the society. Her sisters and brother went to school, but she always stayed at home. Her world

became narrow, she stopped social ties; therefore, she felt trauma and suffocation at home and sought a new life outside of the normative group.

Once again when Anjum finally moved from Kwabgah to the graveyard it marked her passage to yet another world. She sheds her brightly coloured costume and dressed herself in Pathan suit. Her adopted femininity gave way to her dreaded masculine features. She converted the local cemetery into a kind of guesthouse, and she called it a Jannat or paradise. She opened a funeral service company catering to the marginalized and persecuted groups. When the municipal authorities warned her from living in the graveyard, she told them that she was not “living in the graveyard” but that she was “dying in it”. Anjum’s passage from “the world of dreams” to “paradise” was a response to kind of fear that threatened her survival as species in the universe. The graveyard reinforced Anjum’s plight as a transgender in the world, a state of void and non-existence. She tried to overcome the fear of her mortality by referring to the graveyard as a paradise. She tried to unsettle and obliterate the division between the living and the dead, the state of existence and non-existence in her attempted to overcome the ambivalent state of her existence. She was left to survive in peace only when “Ziauddin, the blind imam ... befriended her and began to visit her” (p. 3). Her uniqueness as a person was emphasized by the novelist:

It doesn't matter. I'm all of them. I'm Romi and Juli, I'm Laila and Majnu. And Mujna, why not? Who says my name is Anjum? I'm not Anjum, I'm Anjuman. I'm a mehfil, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. Is there anyone else you would like to invite? Everyone's invited (Roy, 2017, p. 4).

5. CONCLUSION

Hijras belong to lower classes and poorer castes who experience marginalized economic structure. Though Anjum faced many adverse situations in mainstream social spaces, she tried to accommodate herself in the changing world. It is important that people should come forward to eradicate discrimination and economic hardship that these transgenders go through. This paper explored that hijras are human beings, and they have rights to live with dignity. Being a trans woman comes with sufferings in the present community. The world needs to change. Gender does not matter when it comes to a heart of acceptance. Accepting everyone as they are, is what we need. Change in gender creates no difference in the emotions, pains, sufferings, care, love and

anger in a person. When society fails to understand this, voicing out and protests happen. Feminists arose when women were marginalized. Similarly, in the present world, the transgender community needs an up-rise after all the hardships they underwent.

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